

# JAMES MADISON AND AMERICAN POLITICAL FACTIONS' ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE WAR OF 1812

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It would be hard to evaluate the two presidential terms of James Madison without taking into account the War of 1812, which is immediately associated with this outstanding politician and one of the Founding Fathers of the United States of America. Many American historians consider him guilty of the outbreak of the conflict, and to this very day the titles of some books referring to the war, such as J.C.A. Stagg's work, *Mr. Madison's War*, published in 1983, emphasize the fact that this president contributed to its outbreak.

After his second term in office, Jefferson, despite his friends' encouragement, refused to run for president again, and offered his support to James Monroe of Virginia. However, members of the Republican Party decided to lend their support to James Madison, who received the party's nomination for the presidential elections. In the 1808 elections, Madison defeated the Federalists' candidate, Charles Cotesworth Pinckney, receiving 122 votes in the Electoral College, compared with his opponent's mere 54 votes. The office of vice-president was offered to George Clinton, who was replaced by Elbridge Gerry in 1812.<sup>2</sup>

At the moment when James Madison assumed office as president, no less than one million settlers inhabited the area determined by the course of the Mississippi and the Ohio rivers. In the face of the disastrous state of the economy and the fiasco of embargo politics applied by Thomas Jefferson, the inhabitants of the West and the plantation-dominated South declared themselves strongly for the tightening of sanctions against Great Britain. There were also voices calling for war. Such were the banners under which young, ambitious politicians from these areas began their campaigns for Congress in 1810. One result of the elections was the changing of political generations in Congress. For the Federalists, the elections were disastrous; in the Senate this group's representation was reduced to a mere faction (6 seats out of 34 available). They did no better in the House of Representatives, where they only took 37 out of 142 seats. The conservative Republican faction of the Jefferson

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<sup>1</sup> J.C.A. Stagg, *Mr. Madison's War, Politics, Diplomacy, and Warfare in Early American Republic 1783–1830*, Princeton University Press, New Jersey 1983.

<sup>2</sup> P. Smith, *The Shaping of America, A People's History of the Young Republic*, Penguin Books, New York 1980, vol. 3, p. 575; R.A. Rutland, *James Madison*, University Press of Kansas, Lawrence 1990, p. 93; E. Channing, *The Jeffersonian System 1800–1811*, Cooper Square Publishers, New York 1968, pp. 222–223.

school, which until then constituted the core of the party, was weakened at the same time.<sup>3</sup>

The new generation of congressmen, who mostly came from the South and the West and who formed the so-called *War Hawks* faction, was to exercise an ever-increasing influence on the nature of Congress. The leading representatives of this group were: Felix Grundy of Tennessee; Henry Clay and Richard M. Johnson of Kentucky; John C. Calhoun, Langdon Cheves, William Lowndes and David R. Williams of South Carolina; George M. Troup and Peter B. Porter of New York; and John A. Harper of New Hampshire. Henry Clay of Kentucky, an outstanding orator and lawyer, became the informal leader of the group, and was elected Chairman of the House of Representatives, thus beginning his notable political career. This group of young, active Republicans was the first generation after the American Revolution; they did not remember the cruelties of the war and, additionally, had been brought up in the atmosphere of continuous political humiliation and economic restrictions inflicted on the United States by the British Empire. These politicians, when calling for war with Great Britain, emphasized, apart from the continuous conflict on the American and Canadian border and the British system of blockades, the element of wounded national pride by proving that the United States was not treated by the Albion on a par with other countries. They claimed that a war would teach the British a harsh lesson and bring the United States new territorial gains in the form of British Canada and Spanish Florida.<sup>4</sup>

The administration itself also fueled imperial moods. When Madison, in interpreting the contract of the purchase of the imprecisely defined territory of Louisiana, annexed on his own accord a part of Florida in 1810, he whetted the extremists' appetites. The loud group of *War Hawks* did not only pushed its standpoint in Congress, but also ran a forceful pro-war press campaign emphasizing the fact that, despite the successfully concluded revolution, Americans continued to experience painful British interventions into their lives in the form of trade restrictions as well as border and naval provocations. Their voices were accompanied by those of the farmers from the Mississippi River Valley and cotton and tobacco planters from the South, who had been experiencing hardships as a result of a fall in the prices of their articles caused by decreased export.<sup>5</sup>

Influenced by the campaign announcing the need to protect the country's honor, the Naval Secretary, Paul Hamilton, clearly indicated in meetings with sea captains in 1810 and 1811 that situations in which American vessels surrender without a fight and are searched in the close proximity of American coasts are humiliating and would not be tolerated. In May 1811, after a series of incidents, the frigate USS

<sup>3</sup> K.Ch. Babcock, *The Rise of American Nationality 1811-1819*, (Greenwood Press Publishers, New York 1969), p. 50; H. Adams, *History of the United States of America during the Administrations of James Madison*, The Library of America, New York 1986, p. 221.

<sup>4</sup> J.W. Pratt, *Expansionists of 1812*, Macmillan, (New York 1925), p. 13; D. Hickey, *The War of 1812, A Forgotten Conflict*, University of Illinois Press, Chicago 1989, p. 30; K.Ch. Babcock, *The Rise of American Nationality...*, op.cit., pp. 51-52.

<sup>5</sup> M.K. Latimer, *South Carolina - A Protagonist of the War of 1812*, "American Historical Review", vol. LXI (1955-1956), pp. 921-929; G.R. Taylor, *Agrarian Discontent in the Mississippi Valley Preceding the War of 1812*, "Journal of Political Economy", vol. XXXIX (1931), pp. 471-505.

*President* was sent to protect American trading vessels. On May 16, 1811, the frigate opened fire on the English corvette HMS *Little Belt*, an action which was received with great approval in the United States.<sup>6</sup>

In his yearly presidential address on November 5, 1811, President Madison exhibited the futility of searching for righteous solutions in a peaceful manner and announced that Congress had commissioned him to prepare the country for war and to take the appropriate measures required by the critical situation. A month later Congress was agitated by the news of a clash between the Governor of Indiana, General William Henry Harrison, and the Indian Confederation at Tippecanoe.<sup>7</sup>

Although the *War Hawks* wanted war, even they realized that the United States was not prepared. A delay in the declaration of war was the result of a lack of the means to conduct the war and of discord, even among the *Hawks*, over which formations would be most needed and how they should be used in the most efficient manner. Despite the actual lack of a real fleet, opposition to the development of the Navy, by equipping it with large front-line units, was still common. In November, the Foreign Affairs Committee ordered immediate military preparations, including the arming of trading vessels and the bringing of previously disarmed warships to standby.<sup>8</sup> This produced sixteen ships and thus reinforced the Navy. In mid-January 1812, the Naval Committee ordered the construction of twelve front-line ships and twenty-five frigates.<sup>9</sup> Again, however, opinions were divided; some *Hawks*, particularly those from the Mississippi Valley, kept arguing that Great Britain was such a great naval power that building the fleet was pointless anyway. They were afraid that the merchant class would become more powerful, and suggested starting on-land operations by annexing Canada. This opinion was, by the way, shared by most Republicans, together with Thomas Jefferson, who wrote to Kościuszko:

"Our present enemy will have the sea to herself, while we shall be equally predominant at land, and shall strip her of all her possessions on this continent"<sup>10</sup>.

The debate over the proclamation war on Great Britain in the first half of 1812 showed clearly that there was a strong faction of congressmen opposed to the confrontation. This opposition was represented mainly by the members of the Federalist Party, represented by the three main states of New England. Just like the administration, they wanted to strengthen the position of the United States in the international arena, to protect trade and to increase the number of soldiers; however, they were opposed to any radical steps that would lead to war and expose the territories of New England, situated closest to the border with British provinces in Canada and along the coast, to destruction. The fears of the politicians from the opposition were additionally based on the unrest caused by the *War Hawks* representing the Frontier States, who kept increasing their influence in Congress.

<sup>6</sup> R. Horsman, *Causes of War of the 1812*, (New York 1962), p. 220.

<sup>7</sup> B. Perkins, *Prologue to War, England and the United States 1805-1812*, University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London 1970, p. 290.

<sup>8</sup> *American State Papers, Documents Legislative and Executive of the Congress of the United States, Foreign Relations*, Washington 1833, t. 3, p. 538.

<sup>9</sup> *Annals of Congress*, 12<sup>th</sup> Congress 1st Session, pp. 803-823.

<sup>10</sup> Jefferson to Kościuszko, *Monticello*, 28 June 1812, Biblioteka Czartoryskich, Muzeum Narodowe w Krakowie, MNK 635/42.

Before Congress passed the Act of War Declaration, representatives of the state of Massachusetts stepped forward with a memorial opposing this intention<sup>11</sup>. After the war had been declared, 34 congressmen out of 49 who voted against the war signed the protest, known as *Address of the Minority to their Constituents*, in which they forcefully opposed the war policy of the Republicans, blaming them for all the consequences that might befall the country as a result of the war<sup>12</sup>.

When war preparations in the United States were at full blast, the idea of a compromise was ripening on the other side of the Atlantic. On June 16, 1812, in response to the motion of a member of the House of Commons, Henry Brougham, to withdraw *Orders in Council*, the British Foreign Minister Robert Stuart Castlereagh implied that the government intended to do so. This eventually took place on June 23. This, however, came too late, since on June 1 Madison approached Congress with the motion of declaring war on Great Britain, which he amplified with a list of grievances justifying such measures.<sup>13</sup> On June 4, the House of Representatives passed the declaration of war by a vote of 79 to 49. The voting revealed significant differences in attitudes among the representatives of individual states. New England, New York and the states in between, that is, the areas that would be most exposed to military operations in case of war, were strongly against it. The plantation-dominated South and the farmer-dominated West, supporters of territorial expansion, supported the declaration. Voting in the Senate took place on June 17, and here also the supporters of the war won by a vote of 19 to 13.<sup>14</sup> Ultimately, 81% of Republican representatives in both Houses voted for the war (98:23), while all Federalists voted against it (39:0). The case looked similar, as mentioned earlier, if one considered the territories; the states of New England, New York and New Jersey voted against the war (35:17), while the remaining states voted for it (62:14).<sup>15</sup>

The next day President Madison signed the declaration declaring war on Great Britain.<sup>16</sup> Thomas Jefferson wrote in his letter to Kościuszko, dated June 28, 1812: "I have known no war entered into under more favorable auspices".<sup>17</sup> The discrepancy in opinions did not cease with the beginning of military operations.

The Federalists consistently tried to minimize the participation of the New England states in the armed conflict. These states constituted the most affluent part of the country, and Madison counted a lot on their proportional financial support. However, the Federalists, who controlled the banks, did not want to finance the war, which brought the country's budget to the brink of bankruptcy. The situation was similar with the state militias, who were forbidden by the governors of the New England states, on the grounds of state laws, to participate in operations outside the borders of the country, and in extreme cases also of the state. Political rivalry be-

<sup>11</sup> Memorial for Peace, New-England Palladium, Boston, Massachusetts, 12 June 1812.

<sup>12</sup> Address of Minority to their Constituents, Niles Register, 11 July 1812.

<sup>13</sup> *American State Papers, Foreign Affairs*, t. 3, pp. 405–407.

<sup>14</sup> *Annals of Congress*, 12th Congress, 1st Session, p. 297.

<sup>15</sup> D. Hickey, *The War of 1812*, op.cit., p. 46.

<sup>16</sup> Declaration of War: John Brannan, *Official Letters of the Military and Naval Officers of the United States during the War with Great Britain in the Years 1812, 13, 14, 15*, Washington 1823, p. 27.

<sup>17</sup> Jefferson to Kościuszko, Monticello, 28 June 1812, BCz. MNK 635/42.

tween Federalists and Republicans had a fatal effect on the officers; generals nominated along political lines were both incompetent and in permanent conflict with one another.

A few months after the declaration of war on Great Britain, presidential elections took place in the United States. Madison, who had decided to run for his second term, no longer had the support he enjoyed in 1808, even within the circles of his own party. What is more, the Federalists obtained quite good results in the elections to Congress and, despite the fact that the Republicans were still the majority in the House and in state authorities, the result of the elections was unsure, mainly due to a division within the Republican Party, where some politicians were not satisfied with Madison's government. The presidential campaign started in February 1812; by May, Madison had received the support of two-thirds of the members of the Republican Party in Congress. Republicans from New York and other northern states put forward their own candidate, De Witt Clinton, the mayor of New York.<sup>18</sup> Supporters of Clinton criticized the current system of selecting candidates for the presidential office in an address published in the summer 1812; according to them, the system favored politicians from the Virginian Dynasty, who, by representing the agrarian interests of the South, placed them above the interests of the more industrialized northern states. The address, moreover, blamed the administration for the clumsiness of military operations.<sup>19</sup> The division within the Republican Party, which emerged during the presidential elections, presented the Federalists with a dilemma. They could either select their own candidate, who would stand no chance in the elections, or support Madison's rival in the hopes that this would contribute to the weakening of the Republican Party and lead to the speedy conclusion of the war. It was also of no little importance that Clinton had been put forward by the northern states to protect their own interests. At the Republican Party Convention, which took place in September 1812, the Republican Party did not officially support Clinton, but it did not decide to put forward its own candidate either, which meant indirect support for Madison's rival. During the presidential elections Clinton won in all the states of New England, apart from Vermont; he also came out victorious in New York and New Jersey, altogether winning 89 votes. Madison received 128 votes in the Electoral College. The elections made it clear how unpopular the idea of war was in the northern states: Madison lost in all but two of them, both of them north of the Potomac River. Nevertheless, the votes received in the southern and western states were sufficient to grant him victory in the elections.<sup>20</sup> However, military misfortunes and the division within the ruling party were reflected in the results of the elections to Congress, since the Republican seats in the House of Representatives were reduced from 75% to 63%, and in the Senate from 82% to 78%. Particularly painful was the loss of seats in the northern states: New York, Massachusetts and New Hampshire. As a result of the state authority elections, Republicans lost power in Massachusetts, New Jersey, Maryland and New York.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> D. Hickey, *The War of 1812*, op.cit., pp. 100–101.

<sup>19</sup> Address of New York Committee of Correspondence, 17 August 1812, Niles Register, 12 September 1812.

<sup>20</sup> R.A. Rutland, *Presidency of James Madison*, op.cit., pp. 117–118.

<sup>21</sup> D. Hickey, *The War of 1812*, op.cit., p. 105.

The presidential elections of the fall of 1812 were the last chance for the opponents of the war to end it quickly. The satisfaction, which Federalists undoubtedly felt in obtaining the best result in the elections since 1790, could not compensate for the fact that the anti-war policy of this party failed. This was to contribute in the near future to the decreasing importance of the group itself. On the other hand, despite the fact that Republicans maintained their supremacy in Congress, the division that appeared within the party and the loss of influence in the northern states, the richest and the most industrialized, did not augur well for this group and the country it governed. The ever-increasing discord between the north of the country, which was opposed to the war, and the remaining states reached its climax in 1814, and was expressed in the Hartford Convention.

The War of 1812 did not bring decisive results; neither was it supported by the entire nation. Federalists opposed it forcefully, and the popularity of this group in the New England states grew even in the places where the party had kept losing its support before the war, e.g. in Vermont. In Massachusetts and Connecticut, the representation of Federalists in state governments increased from 75.0% in 1812 to 85.7% in 1813; in Vermont, which was not traditionally a pro-Federalist state, the representation of politicians from this party in the authorities grew from 29.7% in 1812 to 42.0% in 1813.<sup>22</sup> Had the war lasted longer, the possibility of a secession of the New England states cannot be excluded. The movement for leaving the Union was particularly strong in this part of the country, and the military defeats of the American army gave it an even greater momentum, of which one external manifestation was the famous Hartford Convention called in mid-December 1814. This grew from a meeting of representatives of other states opposed to the war and was organized by the state authorities of Massachusetts and scheduled to take place on October 17, 1814. Delegates came from the states of Connecticut, Rhode Island, Vermont and New Hampshire. The most radical politicians were Caleb Strong, the governor of Massachusetts, who put forward a proposal to sign a separate peace between the New England states and Great Britain, and John Lowell, who called for secession. Strong, in strict conspiracy, sent envoys to General John Sherbrooke, the commander of the British army in Halifax, with a proposal of signing a separate peace treaty. Having consulted London, Sherbrooke informed the envoys on December 13 that if the president and the Senate did not ratify the Treaties of Ghent, Great Britain would sign a peace treaty with the New England states. John Lowell went much further. In three pamphlets, entitled *Mr. Madison's War*, *Perpetual War*, *The Policy of Mr. Madison* and *Thoughts in a Series of Letters, in Answer to Questions Respecting the Division of States*, he suggested the secession of the thirteen original states and the passing of a new constitution which would protect the naval and commercial interests of New England. At the Hartford Convention, it was the moderate delegates who ultimately gained the upper hand despite aggressive speeches and criticism of the administration. They were against the break-up of the unity of the

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<sup>22</sup> D.G. Alcock, *The Best Defence is...Smuggling?, Vermonters During the War of 1812*, "Canadian Review of American Studies", vol. 25, No. 1, 1995, pp. 75-76.

United States. News about the signing of peace treaties and their quick ratification by the Senate and the president ultimately quieted the atmosphere.<sup>23</sup>

However, these events caused one of the results of the war to be, in the final analysis, the fall of the Federalist Party. Paradoxically, during the time of the conflict, the influence of the group kept growing steadily, especially in the New England states. Nevertheless, after the end of the war this situation changed. Opposition to the war was popular during the military operations, but not after their conclusion, particularly so since the nation was impressed by the victorious battle of New Orleans, which increased nationalistic enthusiasm. Federalists, who decided that the best way to force the country's administration to end the conflict was steadfast opposition through rough press releases, refusal to send state militia to the front, or unwillingness to finance the war, had gradually earned the reputation of lacking patriotism, placing state interests over the interests of the whole country, and nursing pro-British sympathies. The revelation of the plans of the politicians participating in the Hartford Convention, which aimed at the protection of the interests of New England even at the price of secret negotiations with the enemy, added fuel to the flames. Even though secession was never seriously considered at the Convention, its participants were accused of high treason. The resulting political scandal seriously eroded the reputation of the Federalist Party; the group began to lose popularity and supporters rapidly and, finally, disappeared from the political scene altogether.<sup>24</sup> The last Federalist Party candidate for President was Rufus King, a senator from New York, who in 1816 lost the race for the White House to James Monroe by an electoral margin of 34 to 183. Only three states voted for King. His defeat was particularly acute in New York, which, like most states, supported Monroe.<sup>25</sup> Some Federalists who remained in politics joined the Republican faction of De Witt Clinton, known as Clintonian Republicans, and the faction of National Republicans, of which one result was a split within the Republican Party, which divided into National Republicans and Democratic Republicans. A new stage began in the history of American political parties.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> L.H. Brune, *Chronological History of United States Foreign Relations*, Garland Publishing, INC. New York & London 1985, vol. I, p. 122; H. Adams, *History*, op.cit., pp. 1108–1123.

<sup>24</sup> R.V. Remini, *Nacjonalizm, partykularyzm i rozwój demokracji, historia Stanów Zjednoczonych Ameryki*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warszawa 1995, vol. 2, p. 149.

<sup>25</sup> K.Ch. Babcock, *The Rise of American Nationality*, op.cit., pp. 202–203.

<sup>26</sup> D.R. Fox, *The Decline of Aristocracy in the Politics of New York 1801–1840*, Harper Torchbooks, 1965, pp. 197–200; L. Benson, *The Concept of Jacksonian Democracy*, New York, 1964, pp. 4–6.

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